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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
05BUENOSAIRE5496	2005-03-03 21:42	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Buenos Aires

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1362538-puntos-ciegos-en-el-territorio-argentino>

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 BUENOS AIRES 000496

SIPDIS

PASS NSC FOR TOM SHANNON, KIM BREIER, NILMINI GUNARATNE,

DEL RENIGAR

PASS USTR FOR SUE CRONIN

TREASURY FOR DAS LEE, DAVID DRYSDALE, RAMIN TOLOUI AND

CHRIS KUSHLIS AND OCC FOR CARLOS HERNANDEZ

USCINCSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/03/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AR](#) [SNAR](#) [OFDA](#) [MEETINGS](#) [WITH](#) [AMBASSADOR](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR TRAVELS TO SALTA TO MEET WITH GOVERNOR,

COUNTERNARCOTICS OFFICIALS AND BUSINESS LEADERS

REF: BUENOS AIRES 00397

Classified By: Ambassador Lino Gutierrez for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador Gutierrez traveled to the northern province of Salta February 24-25 to meet with Governor Romero, to review the current state of U.S.-Argentine counternarcotics cooperation on the northern

border, and to exchange views with leading business executives in the province. Governor Romero expressed his appreciation for the visit and his recognition of the importance of cooperation between the U.S. and Argentina. Romero said he admires the U.S. and supports the FTAA. He also highlighted to the Ambassador the province's good record of fiscal responsibility and impressive economic growth rates in the past few years. The Ambassador toured the Northern Border Task Force (NBTF) headquarters and was briefed by NBTF and Gendarmeria commanders. The commanders were proud of the recent seizure of 149 kilos of cocaine in Salta by the two forces. They expressed their gratitude for the critical support that the U.S. provides the NBTF and Gendarmeria. The Ambassador was the guest of honor at a meeting of leading business executives that produced a useful exchange of ideas on U.S. policy. The Ambassador also met with Salta mayor Miguel Angel Isa who stressed the economic boom the city is experiencing, fueled by the tourism and construction sectors. END SUMMARY.

Positive Meeting With Governor Romero

12. (C) The Ambassador was received by Governor Juan Carlos Romero for dinner at his home on February 24. In the conversation with the Ambassador, Governor Romero highlighted Salta's continued economic growth, led by the tourism and agriculture sectors. Romero also pointed to the province's strong record of fiscal responsibility. Romero was justifiably proud that the province never defaulted on their debt when so many of their neighbors did in the past few years. "We have not signed the (Federal) Fiscal Responsibility Law because ours (provincial) is much better." Romero felt that co-participation reform was unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future, even after the debt issue was resolved and the elections completed.

13. (C) When asked about his relations with Kirchner, Governor Romero described the relations as cordial. Romero did not think Kirchner would try to run his own candidates in Salta in the October 2005 legislative elections, as "he (Kirchner) does not have much of a following here." He did allude to his fears that "many local officeholders (who had backed Menem in the 2003 elections) could be affected" in the upcoming elections. Asked about the Menem/Rodriguez Saa alliance, Romero joked that "they should have done this in 2003 (during the presidential election)." He said he was the

one who advised Menem to withdraw from the 2003 presidential race after the first round when it became clear Menem would lose big. "There is no second round tradition in Argentina."

Romero lamented the fact that former President Eduardo Duhalde prevented an internal primary to choose a single Peronist candidate in 2003 "because he would have lost" to Menem. Note: Romero was Carlos Menem's running mate in his 2003 presidential bid. Salta is one of the only provinces where President Kirchner has not made an official visit. However, in a sign of warming relations, Governor Romero and President Kirchner met in Buenos Aires on March 2 to announce the construction of 2000 housing units in Salta using federal funds. End Note

14. (C) Romero expressed admiration for the U.S. One daughter currently attends Georgetown and his other children have attended U.S. universities. Romero professed to the Ambassador to be pro-FTAA. Governor Romero criticized the central government's "statist" policies and said that he believed in the free market. Governor Romero thanked the Ambassador for his visit to Salta and said he looked forward to continued good relations with the U.S. and the Embassy.

SALTA: DRUG CORRIDOR TO BUENOS AIRES

15. (C) The Ambassador traveled to Salta in the wake of the Buenos Aires Airport scandal involving the smuggling of 59 kilos of cocaine (Reftel) and one day following the seizure of 149 kilos of cocaine by the Northern Border Task Force (NBTF) and the Gendarmeria operating in Salta. The trip was perfectly timed to take advantage of increased news coverage of narcotics related issues and enabled him to highlight the assistance and support the USG offers Argentina in the counternarcotics area.

16. (C) The Ambassador toured the DEA-funded NBTF headquarters and received a briefing by NBTF commander Claudio Domenichini on February 25. Domenichini explained that 90 percent of cocaine entering Argentina passed through the Province of Salta and asserted that the NBTF played a pivotal role in Argentina's drug interdiction effort. He stated that the NBTF interdicted 110 kilos of cocaine last year as a direct result of investigations and so far this year had already interdicted 194 kilos of cocaine. (COMMENT: Domenichini's choice of statistics is of interest as he cited only narcotics seizures directly related to the unit's investigative efforts and did not include drugs seized by

random road block and drug dog searches. By claiming all seizures in which the NBTF participated in some way he could have boasted a much larger number, as is the common practice by GOA law enforcement agencies. Domenichini's choice of statistics is evidence of his integrity, his commitment to modern investigative techniques as opposed to random searches and his DEA/INL funded training. END COMMENT.) Domenichini discussed the NBTF canine unit and expressed the hope that DEA/INL could provide a planned drug dog training course in Salta later this year. In response to a question about the use of small aircraft in smuggling operations, Domenichini stated that there had been a great increase in the number of aircraft in the northern part of the country and stated that the NBTF was working with authorities in Santiago del Estero, Chaco, Salta and Tucuman on the issue. All agreed on the need for the GOA to acquire radar systems in the short term to deal with the problem of airborne smuggling. The Ambassador asked Domenichini about inter-agency relations to which Domenichini replied that relations between the police and Gendarmeria were not the problem. He stated that the major obstacle to effective enforcement rested with the Salta-based federal judges. He related how it often took too long to obtain warrants from judges in time sensitive cases and opined that in general Argentina's current laws and legal system hamper his force's efforts to effectively combat narcotics traffickers. The Ambassador thanked Domenichini and his staff for their dedicated efforts in the area of narcotics enforcement and praised their recent successes.

17. (C) The Ambassador received a briefing by Gendarmeria Comandante Jorge Ramon Tapia, the Commander of operations in the Salta area, and Gendarmeria Comandante Anibal Maiztegui, the former commander in Salta and current director of the Gendarmeria's national narcotics unit. The meeting started with a conversation regarding the recent narcotics scandal in the Buenos Aires airport. Maiztegui opined that the incident showed a general lack of control by the services involved and added a point about the defunct DEA-sponsored airport task force that used to operate in the Buenos Aires airport. It was an obvious comparison between the lack of control and communication in Buenos Aires and the healthy coordination between the NBTF and other groups involved in counternarcotics operations in the Salta area. Both Gendarmeria officers briefed the Ambassador on the narcotics situation in the border area, highlighting their belief that members of the Bolivian government were involved in narcotics trafficking and that members of Colombian narcotics organizations were operating in the area. In response to the

Ambassador's question about radar, Maiztegui stated that the issue was difficult for the Gendarmeria as the decision rested with the President, and as such the Gendarmeria dared not criticize the lack of action on this issue. He added that for 12 years the lack of radar had been a major and growing problem in the region. Tapia stated that in truth his organization could not possibly hope to control the entire border that the Provinces of Salta and Jujuy shared with Bolivia due to the rugged nature of the terrain and the simple lack of manpower. He said that, recognizing the futility of controlling the border, the Gendarmeria employs a control-in-depth strategy that utilizes multiple check points at transportation choke-points in the border region to combat the traffickers.

18. (C) Tapia also informed the Ambassador of the lack of jail space in Salta and pointed out that the inability of the correctional facilities to accept prisoners directly impacted the Gendarmeria's operational ability, as each prisoner that could not be transported to a penal institution diverted resources and field troops from operations. He acknowledged that a federal prison had recently been expanded, but stated that it was not big enough to meet current needs. NOTE: The federal government has committed to building a new prison in the Province, but there is no timeline as to when it will be ready for operation. END NOTE.

19. (C) Both commanders echoed Domenichini's comments regarding cooperation and interaction with the judiciary. Tapia asserted that it was common for him to dispatch an officer to court at 8am to request an arrest warrant only for that officer to wait at the court until 8pm in the hope of receiving a warrant. Both men opined to the Ambassador that locally appointed federal judges had more interest in local political issues than in law enforcement. However, they also acknowledged that the recently appointed federal judge in the northern Salta town of Tartagal was working well with the Gendarmeria and seemed to be honest and committed to combating the narcotics traffickers. The Ambassador thanked both men for the briefing and congratulated them on their unit's recent successes.

Positive Exchange of Views with Salta's Business Leaders

10. (SBU) Fundacion Salta hosted a luncheon for the Ambassador to meet with business professionals and government

officials in the province. The main topics these community leaders raised during the Q&A session of the event were trade, Argentina's economy, and U.S. foreign policy. Trade questions focused on the issue of U.S. agricultural subsidies as an impediment to Argentina's support for the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. The Ambassador responded that the World Trade Organization has established a mechanism for addressing concerns about agricultural subsidies. The Ambassador recalled that, although various observers predicted NAFTA would have dire economic consequences for the U.S. and Mexico, both countries have reaped the benefits of freer trade. He also encouraged an approach to the FTAA that would seek common ground on a broad base of issues and not allow sensitivity over subsidies to dismiss the FTAA out of hand. The subjects for the economic questions were the U.S. perspective on Argentina's debt exchange, recommended sectors for investment in Argentina, and the global role of the U.S. dollar as a central bank reserve currency. The Ambassador noted that the U.S. does not, and will not, take a position on whether the terms of the debt exchange are adequate or not. On the matter of investment in the economy, the Ambassador noted that the result of the debt exchange would be key to the tone of discussions with the IMF, the outcome of which could send positive signals to potential investors. He emphasized the importance of legal protections and noted that the growth in the services sector indicated opportunities, and a need, for investment.

11. (SBU) U.S. businessmen at the luncheon raised concerns that the value of the U.S. dollar could fall further if central banks around the globe decide not to continue including the dollar among their reserves. Emboffs replied that fears about the effect of U.S. trade and budget deficits have persisted despite the strength of the U.S. economy. Emboffs also remarked that threats to dump the dollar would probably not yield large-scale changes in central banks' practices to hold dollar-denominated reserves. U.S. foreign policy questions ranged from U.S.-Latin American relations to the Middle East peace process. Ambassador Gutierrez responded that U.S.-Latin American relations have improved and are improving. The U.S. is working to expand its trade ties with Latin America and has been in discussions on energy integration with many countries in the region. One participant in the luncheon was critical of the U.S. position regarding Argentina's relationship with the IMF, suggesting the U.S. should have been more supportive. The Ambassador was quick to remind the audience that the U.S., unlike other G-7 states, had consistently supported Argentina in the aftermath of its economic crisis. Others in attendance

interjected that the U.S. is not to blame for economic difficulties Argentina brought on itself. The U.S. remains hopeful, the Ambassador remarked, for peace in the Middle East. He maintained that U.S. policy is that Israeli and Palestinian leaders need to achieve this goal themselves.

112. (SBU) Econoff met with Salta Secretary of State Roberto Ibarguren. Ibarguren conveyed his appreciation for the USG's strong anti-narcotics cooperation in the province. He used the occasion of the meeting to ask for Embassy Buenos Aires consideration of expanding the cooperation to include greater customs and immigration controls. Ibarguren said the border with Bolivia needed a modernized system for monitoring flights, cars, and people crossing into Salta. He reported that the Gendarmeria had been successful in apprehending groups of illegal immigrants from the PRC's Fujian Province. He nevertheless would like to work closely with the Embassy to identify "snakeheads" organizing illegal immigration activities into and within the province. Econoff said the Embassy would give these informal requests appropriate consideration and looked forward to continuing a close and productive relationship with the province.

Press Coverage Extensive and Positive

113. (SBU) Press were present on both days of the trip. Clusters of media photographers recorded the Ambassador's airport arrival, his dinner with the governor, and other events. Salta's binational center, ISICANA, hosted a late Thursday afternoon press conference by the Ambassador. Reporters from national cable news, Salta TV and radio stations, Salta's newspapers, national papers, and the wire services were all present. Several reporters asked for and received five-minute exclusives with the Ambassador after the press conference had concluded.

114. (SBU) The Salta press was extremely appreciative that the Ambassador gave them a half-hour of his time to openly answer their questions. One lamented, "If only our city councilmen would give us even a fraction of that time." On Friday the 25th, the Ambassador did a live on-air interview with Buenos Aires' leading radio station, Radio 10. A local TV and radio station also showed up for brief coverage of the Ambassador's visit to the Salta gendarmes' K-9 unit.

115. (SBU) Coverage was extensive and largely positive.

Though Salta press also focused on the fact that the U.S. ambassador was visiting their province and meeting their officials, most stories in Argentine media centered on the Ambassador's responses to questions on the recent scandal involving drug shipment through Buenos Aires' international airport. While coverage varied, the headline of the 2/25 story in circulation leader "Clarín" - "U.S. Warns on drug traffic, but praises the government" - indicates the tone of most reporting. The Ambassador noted that drug transshipment was a problem for Argentina, but that the GOA was making serious efforts to combat it. He praised the level of cooperation U.S. anti-drug forces received from their Argentine counterparts and noted that U.S. anti-drug efforts in Salta provided technical and technological support as part of a joint effort with local counterpart agencies. Comment on the Ambassador's remarks in Salta continued in the same vein throughout the ensuing week, including brief mention in some of the key op-ed columns. Though all media reflected GOA appreciation with U.S. cooperation and the Ambassador's remarks, some reporters suggested that it had been the U.S. that tipped-off the GOA on the recent Buenos Aires airport drug scandal. The Ambassador made clear in his 2/25 interview with leading "Radio 10" that this was not the case.

16. (SBU) The PAO had sidebar visits with Salta province's secretary of culture and education and her staff, and also

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met briefly with Salta city's culture secretary and the rector of the Catholic University of Salta. At all points, past and future cooperation between the Embassy and Salta institutions was discussed. All Salteno interlocutors noted Governor Romero's firm support for increased cultural programming in the city and province. PAS is already providing assistance to some of the programs Governor Romero is most interested in, such as the symphony orchestra.

Mayor Upbeat on City's Economy

17. (SBU) The Ambassador was received by Salta Mayor Miguel Angel Isa at the Salta City Hall on February 24. Isa has been mayor of Salta's capital city since being elected on the Peronist Party (PJ) ticket in 2003. Mayor Isa thanked the Ambassador for his visit and presented him with the keys to the city. Isa highlighted the economic progress that has occurred under his mandate in the city of roughly 600,000.

He reported that the tourism and construction sectors are booming and unemployment is down. The Mayor said that the city recently launched a major tourism advertising campaign in Europe that he thought would help to attract more European tourists. Mayor Isa also highlighted the city's efforts to combat drug addiction. The Ambassador noted the common cause that the United States and Argentina have in fighting drug addiction and trafficking.

118. (SBU) Isa reported that his relations with the province are good. He said that there was an equitable division of responsibilities in the city between the city and provincial governments. He noted that the city was in the midst of a long-term joint project with the provincial government designed to restore the city's numerous colonial-era buildings. The Ambassador thanked Mayor Isa for his hospitality.

Comment:

119. (C) The Ambassador's trip to Salta was productive on many levels. The meetings with political and business elites deepened the Embassy's contacts in this important province and provided for a useful exchange of ideas. The visit to the NBTF and Gendarmeria headquarters emphasized the importance the USG places on counternarcotics efforts at a time when Argentina is fixated on the narcotics issue stemming from the recent Buenos Aires airport drug scandal. Salta's location, sharing borders with Bolivia, Paraguay and Chile, makes this province critical to stemming the flow of illegal drugs into Argentina. The message the Ambassador brought with him to Salta focused on the importance the U.S. places on the bilateral relationship and on the need for continued political, economic, and counternarcotics cooperation. Given the favorable press coverage in Salta and the positive reception the Ambassador received from those with whom he met, it appears that this message was well received.

GUTIERREZ

=====CABLE ENDS=====

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